Our Lord's Solemn Enquiry

A Sermon
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"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—Matthew 27:46.

IF any one of us, lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ had been anywhere near the cross when he uttered those words, I am sure our hearts would have burst with anguish, and one thing is certain—we should have heard the tones of that dying cry as long as ever we lived. There is no doubt that at certain times they would come to us again, ringing shrill and clear through the thick darkness. We should remember just how they were uttered, and the emphasis where it was placed, and I have no doubt we should turn that text over, and over, and over in our minds. But there is one thing, I think, we should never have done if we had heard it—therefore, I am not going to do it—we should never preach from it. It would have been too painful a recollection for us ever to have used it as a text. No; we should have said, "It is enough to hear it." Fully understand it, who can? And to expound it, since some measure of understanding might be necessary to the exposition—that surely were a futile attempt. We should have laid that by; we should have put those words away as too sacred, too solemn, except for silent reflection and quiet, reverent adoration. I felt when I read these words again, as I have often read them, that they seemed to say to me, "You cannot preach from us," and, on the other hand, felt as Moses did when he put off his shoe from off his foot in the presence of the burning bush, because the place whereon he stood was holy ground. Beloved, there is another reason why we should not venture to preach from this text, namely, that it is probably an expression out of the lowest depths of our Saviour's sufferings. With him into the seas of grief we can descend some part of the way; but when he comes where all God's waves and billows go over him, we cannot go there. We may, indeed, drink of his cup, and be baptized with his baptism, but never to the full extent; and, therefore, where our fellowship with Christ cannot conduct us to the full, though it may in a measure—we shall not venture; not beyond where our fellowship with him would lead us aright, lest we blunder by speculation, and "darken counsel by words without knowledge." Moreover, it comes forcibly upon my mind that though every word here is emphatic, we should be pretty sure to put the emphasis somewhere or other too little. I do not suppose we should be likely to put it anywhere too much. It has been well said that every word in this memorable cry

deserves to have an emphasis laid upon it. If you read it, "My God, my God, why hast *thou* forsaken me? I marvel not that my disciples should, but why hast *thou* gone, my Father, God? Why couldst *thou* leave me?" there is a wondrous meaning there. Then take it thus, "My God, my God, why hast thou *forsaken* me? I know why thou hast smitten me; I can understand why thou dost chasten me; but why hast thou *forsaken* me? Wilt thou allow me no ray of love from the brightness of thine eyes—no sense of thy presence whatsoever?" This was the wormwood and the gall of all the Saviour's bitter cup. Then God forsook him in his direst need. Or if you take it thus, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken *me?"* there comes another meaning. "Me, thy well beloved, thine eternal well beloved, shine innocent, thy harmless, thine afflicted Son—why hast thou forsaken *me?* "Then, indeed, it is a marvel of marvels not that God should forsake his saints, or appear to do so, or that he should forsake sinners utterly, but that he should forsake his only Son. Then, again, we might with great propriety throw the whole force of the verse upon the particle of interrogation, "Why." "My God, my God, *why,* ah! why hast thou forsaken me? What is thy reason? What thy motive? What compels thee to this, thou Lord of love? The sun is eclipsed, but why is the Son of thy love eclipsed? Thou hast taken away the lives of men for sin, but why takest thou away thy love, which is my life, from me who hath no sin? Why and wherefore actest thou thus?"

Now, as I have said, every word requires more emphasis than I can throw into it, and some part of the text would be quite sure to be left and not dealt with as it should be; therefore, we will not think of preaching upon it, but instead thereof we will sit down and commune with it.

You must know that the words of our text are not only the language of Christ, but they are the language of David. You who are acquainted with the Psalms know that the 22nd Psalm begins with just these words, so that David said what Jesus said; and I gather from this that many a child of God has had to say precisely what the Lord Jesus, the first-born of the family, uttered upon the cross. Now as God's children are brought into the same circumstances as Christ, and Christ is considered the exemplar, my object to-night will be simply this—not to expound the words, but to say to believers who come into a similar plight, Do as Jesus did. If you come into his condition, lift up your hearts to God, that you may act as he did in that condition. So we shall make the Saviour now not a study for our learning, but an example for reproduction. The first out of these points in which, I think, we should imitate him is this:—

I. UNDER DESERTION OF SOUL, THE LORD JESUS STILL TURNS TO GOD.

At that time when he uttered these words, God had left him to his enemies. No angel appeared to interpose and destroy the power of Roman or Jew. He seemed utterly given up. The people might mock at him, and they might put him to what pain they pleased j at the same time a sense of God's love to him as man was taken from him. The comfortable presence

of God, which had all his life long sustained him, began to withdraw from him in the garden, and appeared to be quite gone when he was just in the article of death upon the cross; and meanwhile the waves of God's wrath on account of sin began to break over his spirit, and he was in the condition of a soul deserted by God. Now sometimes believers come into the same condition, not to the same extent, but in a measure. Yesterday they were full of joy, for the love of God was shed abroad in their hearts, but to-day that sense of love is gone; they droop; they feel heavy. Now the temptation will be at such times for them to sit down and look into their own hearts; and if they do, they will grow more wretched every moment, until they will come well nigh to despair; for there is no comfort to be found within, when there is no light from above. Our signs and tokens within are like sundials. We can tell what is o'clock by the sundial when the sun shines, but if it does not what is the use of the sundial? And so marks of evidence may help us when God's love is shed abroad in the soul, but when that is done, marks of evidence stand us in very little stead. Now observe our Lord. He is deserted of God, but instead of looking in, and saying, "My soul, why art thou this? Why art thou that? Why art thou cast down? Why dost thou mourn?" he looks straight away from that dried-up well that is within, to those eternal waters that never can be stayed, and which are always full of refreshment. He cries, "My God." He knows which way to look, and I say to every Christian here, it is a temptation of the devil, when you are desponding, and when you are not enjoying your religion as you did, to begin peering and searching about in the dunghill of your own corruptions, and stirring over all that you are feeling, and all you ought to feel, and all you do not feel, and all that. Instead of that look from within, look above, look to your God again, for the light will come there.

And you will notice that *our Lord did not at this time look to any of his friends.* In the beginning of his sufferings he appeared to seek oonsolation from his disciples, but he found them sleeping for sorrow; therefore, on this occasion he did not look to them in any measure. He had lost the light or God's countenance, but he does not look down in the darkness and say, "John, dear faithful John, art thou there? Hast thou not a word for him whose bosom was a pillow for thy head? Mother Mary, art thou there? Canst thou not say one soft word to thy dying son to let him know there is still a heart that does not forget him?" No, beloved; our Lord did not look to the creature. Man as he was, and we must regard him as such in uttering this cry, yet he does not look to friend or brother, helper or human arm. But though God be angry, as it were, yet he crieth, "My God." Oh! it is the only cry that befits a believer's lips. Even if God seems to forsake thee, keep on crying to him. Do not begin to look in a pet and a jealous humour to creatures, but still look to thy God. Depend upon it, he will come to thee sooner or later. He cannot fail thee. He must help thee. Like a child if its mother strike it, still if it be in pain it cries for its mother; it knows her love; it knows its deep need of her, and that she alone can supply its need. Oh! beloved, do the same. Is there one in this house who has lately lost his comforts, and Satan has said, "Don't pray"? Beloved, pray more

than ever you did. If the devil says, "Why, God is angry; what is the use of praying to him?" he might have said the same to Christ—"Why dost thou pray to one who forsaketh thee?" But Christ did pray "My God" still, though he says, "Why dost thou forsake me?" Perhaps Satan tells you not to read the Bible again. It has not comforted you of late; the promises have not come to your soul. Dear brother, read and read more; read double as much as ever you did. Do not think that, because there is no light coming to you, the wisest way is to get away from the light. No; stay where the light is. And perhaps he even says to you, "Don't attend the house of God again; don't go to the communion table. Why, surely you won't wish to commune with God when he hides his face from you." I say the words of wisdom, for I speak according to the example of Christ; come still to your God in private and in public worship, and come still, dear brother, to the table of fellowship with Jesus, saying, "Though he slay me, vet will I trust in him, for I have nowhere else to trust; and though he hide his face from me, vet will I cry after him, and my cry shall not be "My friends," but "My God"; and my eye shall not look to my soul, my friends, or my feelings, but I will look to my God. and even to him alone. That is the first lesson, not an easy one to learn, mark you—easier to hear than you will find it to practice. but "the Spirit helpeth our infirmities." The second lesson is this—observe that:—

II. THOUGH UNDER A SENSE OF DESERTION, OUR MASTER DOES NOT RELAX HIS HOLD OF HIS GOD.

Observe it, *"My* God"—it is one hand he grips him with; "My *God"*—it is the other hand he grasps him with. Both united in the cry, "My God." He believes that God is still his God. He uses the possessive particle twice, *"My* God, *my* God."

Now it is easy to believe that God is ours when he smiles upon us, and when we have the sweet fellowship of his love in our hearts; but the point for faith to attend to, is to hold to God when he gives the hard words, when his providence frowns upon thee, and when even his Spirit seems to be withdrawn from thee. Oh! let go every thing, but let not go thy God. If the ship be tossed and ready to sink, and the tempest rages exceedingly, cast out the ingots, let the gold go, throw out the wheat, as Paul's companions did. Let even necessaries go, but oh! still hold to thy God; give not up thy God; say still, notwithstanding all, "In the teeth of all my feelings, doubts, and suspicions, I hold him yet; he is my God; I will not let him go."

You know that in the text our Lord calls God in the original his "strong one"—"Eli, Eli"—"my strong one, my mighty one." So let the Christian, when God turns away the brightness of his presence, still believe that all his strength lies in God, and that, moreover, God's power is on his side. Though it seemed to crush him, yet faith says, "It is a power that will not crush me. If he smite me, what will I do? I will lay hold upon his arm, and he will put strength in me. I will deal with God as Jacob did with the angel. If he wrestle with me, I will borrow strength from him, and I will wrestle still with him until I get the blessing from

him." Beloved, we must neither let go God, nor let go our sense of his power to save us. We must hold to our possession of him, and hold to the belief that he is worth possessing, that he is God allsufficient, and that he is our God still.

Now I would like to put this personally to any tried child of God here. Are you going to let go your God because you have lost his smile? Then I ask you, Did you base your faith upon his smile? for if you did, you mistook the true ground of faith. The ground of a believer's confidence is not God's smile, but God's promise. It is not his temporary sunshine of his love, but his deep eternal love itself, as it reveals itself in the covenant and in the promises. Now the present smile of God may go, but God's promise does not go; and if you believe upon God's promise, that is just as true when God frowns as when he smiles. If you are resting upon the covenant, that covenant is as true in the dark as in the light. It stands as good when your soul is without a single gleam of oonsolation as when your heart is flooded with sacred bliss. Oh! Come then to this. The promise is as good as ever. Christ is the same as ever; his blood is as great a plea as ever; and the oath of God is as immutable as ever. We must get away from all building upon our apprehensions of God's love. It is the love itself we must build on—not on our enjoyment of his presence, but on his faithfulness and on his truth. Therefore, be not cast down, but still call him, "My God."

Moreover, I may put it to you, if, because God frowns, you give him up, what else do you mean to do? Why, is not it better to trust in an angry God than not to trust in God at all? Suppose thou leavest off the walk of faith, what wilt thou do? The carnal man never knew what faith was, and, therefore, gets on pretty fairly in his own blind, dead way; but you have been quickened and made alive, enlightened, and if you give up your faith, what is to become of you? Oh! hold to him then.

"For if shine eye oi faith be dim,
Still hold on Jesus, sink or swim;
Still at his footstool bow the knee
And Israel's God thy strength shall be."

Don't give him up.

Moreover, if faith give up her God because he frowns, what sort of a faith was it? Canst thou not believe in a frowning God? What, hast thou a friend who did the other day but give thee a rough word, and thou saidst, "At one time I could die for that man," and because he gives you one rough word, are you going to give him up? Is this thy kindness to thy friends Is this thy confidence in thy God? But how Job played the man! Did he turn against his God when he took away his comforts from him? No; he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord bath taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord." And do you not know how he put it best of all when he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him "? Yes, if thy faith be only a fair-weather faith, if thou canst only walk with God when he sandals thee in silver, and smooths the path beneath thy feet, what faith is this? Where didst thou get it from? But

the faith that can foot it with the Lord through Nebuchadnezzar's furnace of fire, and that can go walking with him through the valley of the shadow of death—this is the faith to be had and sought after, and God grant it to us, for that was the faith that was in the heart of Christ when forsaken of God. He yet says, "My God."

We have learnt two lessons. Now we have learnt them—(we have gone over them, but have we learnt them?)—may we practice them, and turn to God in ill times, and not relinquish our hold. The third lesson is this:—

III. ALTHOUGH OUR LORD UTTERED THIS DEEP AND BITTER CRY OF PAIN, YET LEARN FROM HIS SILENCE.

He never uttered a single syllable of murmuring, or brought any accusation against his God. *"My* God, why hast thou forsaken me?" There! look at those words. Can you see any blots in them? I cannot. They are crystallised sorrow. but there is no defilement of sin. It was just (I was about to say) what an angel could have said, if he could have suffered; it is what the Son of God did say, who was purer than angels, when he was suffering. Listen to Job, and we must not condemn Job, for we should not have been half so good as he, I daresay; but he does let his spirit utter itself sometimes in bitterness. He curses the day of his birth and so on; but the Lord Jesus does not do that. There is not a syllable about "cursed be the day in which I was born in Bethlehem, and in which I came amongst such a rebellious race as this"—nor not a word, not a word. And even the best of men when in sorrow have at least wished that things were not just so. David, when he had lost Absalom, wished that he had died, instead of Absalom. But Christ does not appear to want things altered. He does not say, "Lord, this is a mistake. Would God I had died by the hands of Herod when he sought my life, or had perished when they tried to throw me down the hill of Capernaum." No; nothing of the kind. There is grief, but there is no complaining; there is sorrow, but there is no rebellion. Now this is the point, beloved, I want to bring to you. If you should suffer extremely, and it should ever come to that terrible pinch that even God's love and the enjoyment of it appears to be gone, put your finger to your lip and keep it there. "I was dumb with silence; I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it." Believe that he is a good God still. Know that assuredly he is working for thy good, even now, and let not a syllable escape thee by way of murmuring, or if it does, repent of it and recall it. Thou hast a right to speak to God, but not to murmur against him, and if thou wouldst be like thy Lord, thou wouldst say just this, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" But thou wilt say no more, and there wilt thou leave him, and if there oome no answer to thy question thou wilt be content to be without an answer.

Now again, I say, this is a lesson I can teach, but I do not know if I can practice it, and I do not know that you can. Only, again, "the Spirit helpeth our infirmities," and he will enable us when we come to "lama sabachthani" to come so far, but not to go farther—to stop there with our Lord. The fourth lesson which, I think, we should learn is this:—

IV. OUR LORD, WHEN HE DOES CRY, CRIES WITH THE INQUIRING VOICE OF A LOVING CHILD.

"My God, *why,* ah! why hast thou forsaken me?" He asks a question not in curiosity, but in love. Loving, sorrowful complaints he brings. *"Why,* my God? Why? Why?" Now this is a lesson to us, because we ought to endeavour to find out why it is that God hides himself from us. No Christian ought to be content to live without full assurance of faith. No believer ought to be satisfied to live a moment without knowing to a certainty that Christ is his, and if he does not know it, and assurance is gone, what ought he to do? Why, he should never be content until he has gone to God with the question, "Why have I not this assurance? Why have I not thy presence? Why is it that I cannot live once I did in the light of thy countenance "And, beloved, the answer to this question in our case will sometimes be, "I have forsaken thee, my child, because thou hast forsaken me. Thou hast grown cold of heart by slow degrees; grey hairs have come upon thee, and thou didst not know; and I have made thee know it to make thee see thy backsliding, and sorrowfully repent of it." Sometimes the answer will be, "My child, I have forsaken thee because thou hast set up an idol in thy heart. Thou lovest thy child too much, thy gold too much, thy trade too much; and I cannot come into thy soul unless I am thy Lord, thy love, thy bridegroom, and thy all." Oh! we shall be glad to know these answers, because the moment we know them our heart will say:—

"The dearest idol I heve known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from its throne,
And worship only thee."

Sometimes the Lord's answer will be, "My child, I have gone from thee for a little to try thee, to see if thou lovest me." A true lover will love on under frowns. It is only the superficial professor that wants sweetmeats every day, and only loves his God for what he gets out of him; but the genuine believer loves him when he smites him, when he bruises him with the bruises of a cruel one. Why, then we will say, "O God, if this is why thou dost forsake us, we will love thee still, and prove to thee that thy grace has made our souls to hunger and thirst for thee." Depend upon it, the best way to get away from trouble, or to get great help under it, is to run close in to God. In one of Quarles's poems he has the picture of a man striking another with a great nail. Now the further off the other is, the heavier it strikes him. So the man whom God is smiting runs close in, and he cannot be hurt at all. O my God, my God, when away from thee affliction stuns me, but I will close with thee, and then even my affliction I will take to be a cause of glory, and glory in tribulations also, so that thy blast shall not sorely wound my spirit.

Well, I leave this point with the very same remark I made before. To cry to God with the enquiry of a child is the fourth lesson of the text. Oh! learn it well. Do practice it when You are in trouble much. If you are in such a condition at this time, practice it now, and in

the pew say, "Show me wherefore thou contendest with me. Search me and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Now the fifth observation is one to be treasured up:—

V. THAT OUR LORD, THOUGH HE WAS FORSAKEN OF GOD, STILL PURSUED HIS FATHER'S WORK—the work he came to do. "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But, mark you, he does not leave the cross; he does not unloose the nails as he might have done with a will; he did not leap down amidst the assembled mockers, and scorn them in return, and chase them far away. but he kept on bleeding, suffering, even until he could say, "It is finished," and he did not give up the ghost till it was finished. Now, beloved, I find it, and I daresay you do, a very easy and pleasant thing to go on serving God when I have got a full sense of his love, and Christ shining in my face, when every text brings joy to my heart, and when I see souls converted, and know that God is going with the Word to bless it. That is very easy, but to keep on serving God when you get nothing for it but blow—when there is no success, and when your own heart is in deep darkness of spirit—I know the temptation. Perhaps you are under it. Because you have not the joy you once had, you say, "I must give up preaching; I must give up that Sunday School. If I have not the light of God's countenance, how can I do it? I must give it up." Beloved, you must do no such thing. Suppose there were a loyal subject in a nation, and he had done something or other which grieved the king, and the king on a certain day turned his face from him, do you think that loyal subject would go away and neglect his duty because the king frowned? No; methinks he would say to himself, "I do not know why the king seemed to deal hardly with me. He is a good king, and I know he is good, if he does not see any good in me, and I will work for him more than ever. I will prove to him that my loyalty does not depend upon his smiles. I am his loyal subject, and will stand to him still." What would you say to your child if you had to chasten him for doing wrong, if he were to go away and say, "I shall not attend to the errand that father has sent me upon, and I shall do no more in the house that father has commanded me to do, because father has beaten me this morning"? Ah! what a disobedient child! If the scourging had its fit effect upon him, he would say, "I will wrong thee no more, father, lest thou smite me again." So let it be with us.

Besides, should not our gratitude compel us to go on working for God? Has not he saved us from hell? Then we may say, with the old heathen, "Strike, so long as thou forgivest." Yes, if God forgives, he may strike if he will. Suppose a judge should forgive a malefactor condemned to die, but he should say to him, "Though you are not to be executed as you deserve, yet, for all that, you must be put in prison for some years," he would say, "Ah! my Lord, I will take this lesser ohastisement, so long as my life is saved." And oh! if our God has saved us from going down to the pit by putting his own Son to death on our behalf, we will love him for that, if we never have anything more. If, between here and heaven, we should have to say, like the elder brother, "Thou never gayest me a kid that I might make merry with my

friends." we will love him still; and if he never does anything to us between here and glory, but lay us on a sick bed, and torture us there, yet still we will praise and bless him, for he has saved us from going down to the pit; therefore, we will love him as long as we live. Oh! if you think of God as you ought to do, you will not be at ups and downs with him, but you will serve him with all your heart, and soul, and might, whether you are enjoying the light of his countenance or not. Now to close. Our Lord is an example for us in one other matter. He is to us our type of what shall happen to us, for whereas he said, "Why hast thou forsaken me?":—

VI. HE HAS RECEIVED A GLORIOUS ANSWER.

And so shall every man that, in the same spirit in the hour of darkness, asks the same question. Our Lord died. No answer had he got to the question, but the question went on ringing through earth, and heaven, and hell. Three days he slept in the grave, and after a while he went Into heaven, and my imagination, I think, may be allowed if I say that as he entered there the echo of his words, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" just died away, and then the Father gave him the practical answer to the question; for there, all along the golden streets, stood white-robed bands, all of them singing their redeemer's praise, all of them chanting the name of Jehovah and the Lamb; and this was a part of the answer to his question. God had forsaken Christ that these chosen spirits might live through him; they were the reward for the travail of his soul; they were the answer to his question; and ever since then, between heaven and earth, there has been constant commerce. Ii your eyes were opened that you could see, you would perceive in the sky not falling stars, shooting downwards, but stars rising upward from England, many every hour from America, from all countries where the gospel is believed, and from heathen lands where the truth is preached and God is owned, for you would see every now and then down on earth a dying bed, but upwards through the skies, mounting among the stars, another spirit shot upward to complete the constellations of the glorified. And as these bright ones, all redeemed by his sufferings, enter heaven, they bring to Christ fresh answers to that question, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" And if stooping from his throne in glory the Prince of life takes view of the sons of men who are lingering here, even in this present assembly, he will see to-night a vast number of us met together around this table, I hope the most, if not all, of us redeemed by his blood and rejoicing in his salvation; and the Father points down to-night to this Tabernacle, and to thousands of similar scenes where believers cluster around the table of fellowship with their Lord, and he seems to say to the Saviour, "There is my answer to thy question, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?'"

Now, beloved, we shall have an answer to our question something like that. When we get to heaven, perhaps not until then, God will tell us why he forsook us. When I tossed upon my bed three months ago in weary pain that robbed me of my night's rest, and my day's rest too, I asked why it was I was there, but I have realized since the reason, for God

helped me afterwards so to preach that many souls were ingathered. Often you will find that God deserts you that he may be with you after a nobler sort—hides the light, that afterwards the light of seven suns at once may break in upon your spirit, and there you shall learn that it was for his glory that he left you, for his glory that he tried your faith. Only mind you stand to that. Still cry to him, and still call him God, and never complain, hut ask him why, and pursue his work still under all difficulties; so being like Christ on earth, you shall be like Christ above, as to the answer.

I cannot sit down without saying just this word. God will never forsake his people for ever. But as many of you as are not his people, if you have not believed in him, he will forsake you for ever, and for ever, and for ever; and if you ask, "Why hast thou forsaken me? "you will get, your answer in the echo of your words, "Thou hast forsaken me." "How shall ye escape if ye neglect so great salvation?"! "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

"But if your ears refuse
The language of his grace,
And hearts grow hard like stubborn Jews,
That unbelieving race;
The Lord in vengeance drest
Shall life his hand and swear,
'You that despised my promised rest
Shall have no portion there.'"

God grant it may never be so with you, for Christ's sake. Amen